

St Mary's Guildhall and Shakespeare



*“Farewell, sweet lords: let’s meet at
Coventry”* (Earl of Warwick, Henry VI Part 3, Scene 8)

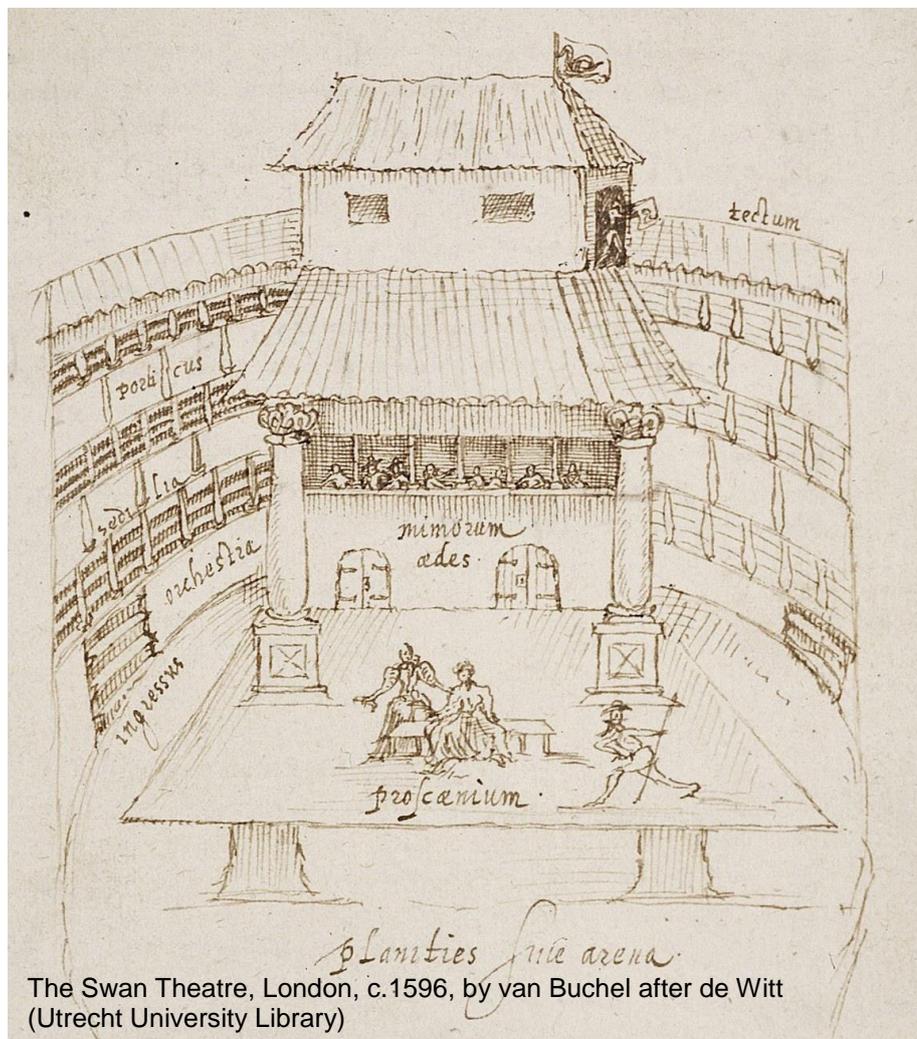
Early drama in England

From its earliest times the Guildhall had theatrical connections: The city's Guilds were required to perform mystery plays on religious feast days and other civic pageants, and records show some of the smaller trade guilds in the city were even hiring rooms at St. Mary's Guildhall to rehearse their plays, presumably as they were too small to maintain their own 'pageant house'.

Public performances of secular plays in England, however, were informal affairs involving travelling players presenting increasingly bawdy drama in taverns, market squares and other public spaces. To control the often unruly behaviour of these players and their audiences, and to censor what was being performed, in 1559 Elizabeth I issued a proclamation calling for all players to be licensed. A ban was also introduced on plays with religious and political content, which inevitably led to the sad demise of the centuries-old tradition of the mystery plays, which were too blatantly linked to the teachings of the old Catholic church

The rise of Professional Players

The earlier informal troupes of travelling players were now replaced by professional touring companies, who by law had to be authorized by a noble or royal patron, and would subsequently tour under the name of their noble sponsor. These controls were strengthened further by the Vagabond Act of 1572, which placed actors in the same miserable category as common rogues and vagabonds, and threatened severe punishment for “All fencers, bearwards, common players of interludes, and minstrels not belonging to any baron of this realm, or to any other honourable person of greater degree, wandering abroad without the license of two justices at the least..”



The Swan Theatre, London, c.1596, by van Buchel after de Witt (Utrecht University Library)

Whilst such patrons were nominally responsible for the conduct of their players, the companies were independent commercial organizations, not salaried or exclusive employees, who would be paid by their patron only for particular commissioned performances. Equally, however, being licensed to a noble patron permitted the companies to travel without fear of the Vagabond Act, and when touring other cities in the realm no performance could take place without a licence to present to the mayor.

London remained the focus for professional companies of players, as it was here where the biggest audiences were to be found and where a play could be profitably marketed. Every player's ambition was to belong to a company securely resident in London. However, despite the new levels of professionalism and regulation, companies of players had no permanent base

and often had to tour to make ends meet. From 1567 the first official playhouses appeared in London, but beyond the capital touring players continued to perform in a range of approved venues including guildhalls, large city taverns and, for the fortunate few, the Great Halls of the nobility

Even the most successful companies were persuaded out of their London playhouses on occasions, either to perform at noble residences or on the lucrative invitation of a provincial city's mayor. There were other occasions, however, when outbreaks of plague in London prompted the city authorities to ban all plays (for fear the disease would spread amongst the large audiences), forcing the leading companies to take their plays out on tour to maintain their livelihood.

Shakespeare's acting career

Born in 1564, Shakespeare's early passion for drama may have been fuelled by the companies of touring players who passed through Stratford upon Avon regularly from 1568, their performances at Stratford's Guildhall without doubt being witnessed by William's father, John Shakespeare who was appointed to the post of High Bailiff in that year. Shakespeare would also have been greatly influenced by the annual cycle of Coventry mystery plays, which it is more than likely he witnessed as a youth before they were finally suppressed in 1580.

Shakespeare's life and whereabouts are lost to history from 1585, until he reappears as an actor-playwright in London in 1592. There is still lively debate, however, over which company he performed with at this time, as two companies – Pembroke's Men and Lord Strange's Men - are recorded as performing Shakespeare's earliest plays at this time. To add to the confusion, plague in London between 1592 and 1594 forced both companies to go out on tour, and it was not uncommon in such circumstances for playwrights to sell their plays to other companies, or for actors to move between companies, to maintain their livelihood.

From 1594, however, two companies became dominant, the Admiral's Men and the Lord Chamberlain's Men; Shakespeare is listed among the members of the Lord Chamberlain's Men, whose patron was the court official empowered to oversee plays and all connected business, and who were therefore in effect the official playing company of the court. In 1603 this was made even plainer, when James I granted a Royal Patent to make them the King's Men. Is it possible during his time with these companies that Shakespeare joined them on tour to Coventry and the Guildhall?

As one of England's largest cities, Coventry was a regular stopping point for travelling players in Elizabethan and Jacobean England, and whilst St. Mary's Guildhall has not been specifically referenced in contemporary records as the venue for these performances, it is almost without question that the size and profile of the venue, coupled with the requirement for plays to be performed before the mayor for approval, sets it out as the most likely location.



Performances in Coventry and the Guildhall

There is an entry in the city archives from the autumn of 1586 that records the presence of Lord Chamberlain's Men performing in the city, though one would argue that this is probably too early for Shakespeare to be counted amongst its players. Lord Strange's men, were recorded in the city in 1588 and 1592 and, as Lord Derby's or Earl of Darby's players, in 1594, 1596 and regularly in the early 1600s.

A visit by the Lord Chamberlain's company in its Jacobean guise - the 'King's Men' - is also recorded, in 1608.

Of great interest, however, is a recorded visit by Pembroke's Men to Coventry in 1593, in the same year that they are known to have toured *3 Henry VI*. Was Shakespeare amongst them, either as an actor, or as the playwright curious to know how it would be received in the city? Pembroke's Men paid no recorded visit to the city prior to 1593, and not again until two performances during 1599 (for which they were paid 20 shillings less than in 1593, suggesting that they had slipped to a lower league of touring players by this time).

In *3 Henry VI* the mayors of York and Coventry are separately portrayed as acting with courage and loyalty in support of King Henry VI against the 'usurper' Edward IV, and whilst a 1592 plague outbreak may have initially instigated the move of Pembroke's Men's out of London, bringing the play to Coventry would have been a shrewd strategy, almost guaranteed to secure the mayor's approval and to appeal to a local audience.

In this, and other examples of the 'history plays', it is hard to imagine that Shakespeare wasn't considering the touring potential of his plays when including flattering references to wealthy towns and cities such as York and Coventry that would bring guaranteed access, good audiences and income.

In an essay by J.R. Mulryne on PROFESSIONAL PLAYERS IN THE GUILD HALL, STRATFORD-UPON-AVON, 1568–1597, it is revealed how the civic authorities of Stratford upon Avon grew weary of the behaviour of some players performing at the town's Guildhall, culminating, in 1602, in a ban in their use of the building (the implication being that the building was being used more widely for this purpose, and not just in the presence of the mayor and civic leaders). Coventry's leaders too appear to have had their run-ins with companies of players. In 1600 we are informed of Lord Shandos's players playing at 'the Angell' (presumably an inn) "...contrary to maister maiors pleasure", an act for which they were briefly imprisoned, suggesting that in Coventry the Mayor still, in theory, had some control over performance venues.

Further reading

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